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## **NEWS RELEASE**

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"This release is available electronically on INN (News Net)."

Oct. 21, 1998

**Contact:** Rustem Medora, UM pharmacy professor, (406) 243-4943.

### **THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT ECHINACEA**

by Terry Brenner  
University Relations

There's something about echinacea that scientists still haven't pinned down, even after a century of research: Which of the plant's chemical components work so effectively on one of humankind's peskiest illnesses, the common cold. But there's no denying that echinacea taken at the first signs of a cold can prevent it or at least minimize the unpleasant symptoms.

How so?

"Echinacea increases immunity to infections," says Rustem Medora, a University of Montana pharmacy professor specializing in the medicinal properties of plants. "It works by increasing the white blood cells. The white blood cells act as scavengers that go out and pick up all the riffraff in town."

Now one of the most popular herbal cold remedies in the United States, echinacea comes from the plant *Echinacea angustifolia* -- or a related species, *Echinacea purpurea* -- which commonly goes by names such as American or purple cone flower, snakeroot and Indian head. The plant is native to Kansas, Nebraska, Missouri and eastern Montana, and its history goes back to the American Indians, who were using it when the pioneers came west to settle. Based on what they learned from the Indians, the settlers soon began using echinacea to treat wounds and improve immune function.

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Since then, echinacea's popularity has gone through cycles, Medora says. Its use peaked during the 19th century but virtually died out in America when synthetic drugs came on the scene. Meanwhile, Europeans took it back to their home countries, the Germans did clinical studies that support the herb's effectiveness and echinacea became popular abroad as a cold preventive. Recently it has staged a comeback in America, selling briskly at drug and natural products stores.

Should you decide to try it, here are some things Medora says to keep in mind:

- Take it at the first sign of a cold or when you know you've been exposed. Don't expect echinacea to cure a cold you already have. It may help some but not a lot because the virus is already multiplying too fast.
- For best results, use echinacea tincture, which is commonly one part echinacea to 10 parts of 45 percent alcohol. That ratio as well as the strength of the alcohol varies widely, though. Echinacea tea won't provide the same benefits because tea doesn't extract all the medicinal properties that alcohol does. If you want to make a tea, put some tincture into hot water.
- Follow the dosage specified on the label. It will usually prescribe the dosage in drops.
- Take the proper dose two to three times a day. If it doesn't do the trick in two to three days, it probably won't, but there's no harm in taking it for a week. Taking it for too long will weaken its benefits.
- Take echinacea on an empty stomach. The presence of food in the stomach dilutes its potency. To make echinacea more palatable, put the tincture into a little orange juice.



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■ Avoid excessive use of echinacea during pregnancy and lactation. Data on its toxicity is lacking.

■ Consult with your health professional before taking echinacea if you suffer from an autoimmune disease.

Medora stresses that cultivated echinacea is just as potent as the wild form, and above-ground parts of the plant are as useful as the roots. Too many people stalking the wild form and pulling up the plants to extract the substance from the roots could push the wild form to extinction, he says.

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